

PIGEON ENGLISH: WHY AND HOW?

I wrote *Pigeon English* because I was strongly affected by a real-life story I saw on the news one November day back in 2000. It was the story of a young boy called Damilola Taylor, who had died that day. He was walking home from school when two older boys attacked him, and he was stabbed. He died frightened and alone. I was really shocked and saddened by this. Over the next days and weeks I read a lot about Damilola in the newspapers and saw a lot about him on TV: he was always described as a happy, bright, positive boy who loved his family and wanted to be a doctor. I thought he would have grown up to be a great man who would make the world a better place, and it felt like a tragedy that he wouldn't get the chance to achieve his dreams.

At that time I was living on an estate that was similar to the estate where Damilola lived and died. I knew kids like him – kids who had come to this country from abroad in search of a better life. I started thinking about these kids, and how hard it must be for them to learn how to live in a new country – not just new rules and new friends, but also how to survive and stay positive when there was so much violence and temptation around them. I wondered how Damilola felt and what he thought about. I wanted to tell his story, and theirs. I invented my character, Harri, to represent them, and

I gave him all the qualities I imagined Damilola to have. *Pigeon English* is a tribute to him and to all the kids I knew.

The estate I was living on was quite a dangerous and difficult place – but I still feel lucky to be from there. I was lucky because it made *Pigeon English* easier to write: I was surrounded by the people I was writing about so I had first-hand access to their lives, what they talked about, their hopes and fears, and the things that made them laugh. Some of the scenes in the book actually happened to me or were things I witnessed.

The book is written from Harri's point of view, so in writing it I had to put myself in his trainers. Not only did this allow me to get to know him and the kids he represented, but I also got to know myself better too. Thinking about what Harri might do in a particular situation made me stop and consider my own reactions to things – Harri taught me to be more patient and positive, to look at the world in a more innocent way. Harri made me a better person. It sounds weird because he's a fictional character who I created, but he actually changed me more than I changed him! That's the great thing about reading and writing: it gives us a chance to see what life is like for other people who might be different from us in all sorts of ways, and it also reminds us of the things we have in common.

For me personally, reading and writing were the keys that unlocked my potential. Where I grew up, there was a lot of temptation to do bad things and I could have easily fallen in with the wrong crowd. My life could have turned out very differently, but my ambition to be a writer helped me to stay out of trouble. And I believe that everyone has something that they can grab hold of when things get tough. It could be anything – a talent

for sport, or a love of acting or music – but I think that the key to happiness is to find out what it is that you love, the one thing above all others that makes you feel like yourself, and do it. Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it. Pour the whole of yourself into it, give it everything, and you'll get everything back. It doesn't matter where you come from or who you are, there's no reason why you can't fulfil your dreams.

It's not about where you start in life, but about where you end up. And where we end up isn't something that's decided for us, it's a choice we can all make. Damilola died before he got the chance to make that choice, but you still have choices. This book is for Damilola, and it's for all of you.

Peace and happiness.

Stephen Kelman, June 2012